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ABSTRACT

This survey of 104 employed women disclosed that while half of the respondents indicated higher-level career aspirations, only 12 percent could trace their current higher-level career interest back to high school days or earlier. The respondents listed personal achievement as a major reason for pursuing a higher-level career. Higher income was another important factor determining aspiration. Family and life-style considerations were viewed as the major obstacles to career advancement. The authors present two models of career development--the idealized model and the sexist model--and suggest that the career development of the women in their sample generally fits the sexist model. (Author/DS)

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Factors Influencing the Career Commitment of Women

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Of all the alleged differences between male and female potential managers, perhaps the most damaging for women is the allegation that they are lacking in career commitment. In a recent survey of 884 male managers, Rosen and Jerdee (Note 1) found that the largest perceived difference between women and men was the perceived tendency for women to have a stronger home orientation as opposed to job orientation. Women employees were also seen as absent from work more often than men, and as more likely to quit. These perceptions of lower commitment undoubtedly work to the detriment of many women who do have not only the commitment but also the potential for higher-level careers.

It is also likely, however, that this stereotype of low commitment is an accurate reflection of serious career development problems for many women, involving self-doubts, conflicts, and indecision about career plans.

Patterns of career development among women do not seem to fit idealized career development models very well. According to these idealized models, a general career orientation is supposed to develop in the exploratory stage of life during the teens and twenties, and a stronger commitment toward more specific career goals is supposed to develop in the establishment stage, during the thirties and forties (Super, 1953). Super,

however, found it necessary to describe no less than seven career patterns in order to cover the varied experiences of women. The common thread in most of these female career patterns is the tendency to abort the long-term career and to settle for a dead-end job with a lower level of career commitment.

To some degree this tendency toward career abortion and lack of commitment can be attributed to discriminatory practices of employers. We question, however, whether elimination of these employment barriers alone can solve the career problems of women.

Additional barriers limiting women's career commitment were identified by O'Leary (1974), but as she pointed out, current knowledge about the nature and effects of these barriers is quite limited. Research on women's career plans has concentrated on students and the unemployed, and ignored the large number of women who are presently holding jobs. There is a great need to examine directly the perceptions and attitudes of presently employed women. We nave taken some exploratory steps in that direction, which we would like to review with you now.

Survey of Employed Women

We recently conducted a survey of employed women, exploring their level of commitment to a higher-level career and their perceptions of potential obstacles and attractions for such a career. A questionnaire was administered to a sample of 150 women employed in full time, permanent, non-academic positions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. One hundred four usable questionnaires were returned (70 percent).

The sample included the usual array of jobs in a large university, plus jobs in the University-owned telephone company, water system, and electrical utility. Women in high-turnover entry-level jobs were not included in the sample, so as to concentrate on those women who might be more eligible for higher-level careers. Median age of participants was 28. Sixty-seven percent were married and 43 percent had children under the age of 19 years. Almost two-thirds had a college degree. The sample was fairly evenly split between professional or technical and clerical or administrative work.

Career Commitment. One part of the questionnaire assessed the nature and extent of participants' higher-level career aspirations. About half of the group had fairly strong intentions to pursue a higher-level career. Only 12 percent could trace their current higher-level career interest back to high school days or earlier. For over half of the group their current interest had developed subsequent to taking their present job. So there seems to be considerable interest in moving ahead, but seldom in directions anticipated earlier in life.

Attractions. Another part of the questionnaire asked participants what they saw as major attractions of pursuing a higher-level career. Results are shown in Table 1. Personal achievement was mentioned by almost everyone. Higher anticipated income was another important attraction, mentioned by 59 percent. Other attractions, mentioned by relatively small percentages of participants, were altruistic concerns, general satisfaction, expected affiliative opportunities, autonomy, and job security.

Obstacles. Participants were also asked to indicate what they saw as major obstacles to their pursuit of a higher-level career. Results are shown in Table 2.

Family and life-style considerations predominated. Especially prevalent among these were financial problems, which included loss of current earnings, expenses of additional training or education, and, in a few cases, start-up costs associated with small business ventures. Even among women whose family incomes exceeded $20,000, one-fourth mentioned money as an obstacle. Another important family-related obstacle was the increased time and energy required to pursue the higher-level career. Several women also mentioned conflicts associated with the husband's career or with child-rearing.

About one in three mentioned training requirements as an important obstacle, without specifically mentioning the financial costs associated with training. Some of the women in this group indicated a little uncertainty about their chances for success in training.

Lack of job opportunities was mentioned by only about one woman in four, and only one in ten mentioned sex discrimination.

In summary, while achievement, self-realization, and money were the main attractions, the greatest perceived obstacles to higher-level careers seemed to center around family problems, especially financial difficulties and other stresses associated with training for a higher-level career.

Two Models of Women's Career Development

These findings suggest that the current situation of many employed women might not fit very well with the usual idealized model of career development. Women's situation often seems to fit better with a sexist

model. The idealized and sexist models are contrasted in Figure 1. Both models begin with a growth stage, lasting from birth into the teens. In the idealized model, this stage includes the development of interests and capabilities in a stimulating, tolerant, and supportive environment. In the sexist model, this stage is characterized by socialization toward "female" roles. It appears to us that in this growth stage the sexist model is rapidly losing ground to the ideal model.

The second stage in both models is the exploration stage. In the ideal model, this stage is characterized by a focusing of interests into a general career orientation, accompanied by opportunities for development of career-related abilities. In the sexist model, on the other hand, tension arises between career interests and an interest in getting married and having a family. This tension may be resolved by choosing a compromise career which requires a relatively low degree of commitment.

The third stage in the ideal model is the integration stage, in which a specific career is chosen and integrated with family interests, with a minimum of compromise or sacrifice. This contrasts sharply with the third stage in the sexist model, which is the career abortion stage, in which long-range career development is aborted for the sake of marriage, the husband's career, and the children. In this abortion stage, jobs are sought on the basis of temporary expediency. This is what had happened to many women in our sample.

In the fourth or establishment stage, the ideal model is characterized by continued development of career competence and growing commitment to both career and family, in a supportive environment. In the sexist model, on the other hand, the establishment stage is again marked by sacrifice

through settling into a compromise job with a low level of commitment, or occasionally through embarking on a new career chosen for its compatability with family financial and life-style constraints. For women whose careers have been aborted but but who would now choose a new higher-level path, the educational and training barriers are often discouraging. To go back to school would put them in a role-overload situation, attempting to balance family demands against school demands. Furthermore, returning to school would involve a loss of income from present job, plus additional outlays for schooling, thus placing a heavy financial drain on the family. These family considerations, which also imply a variety of other life-style changes, are major obstacles to the pursuit of higher-level careers among currently employed women.

What can be done to move us from the sexist model to the idealized model? What can be done about the problem of career abortion, and about the difficulty many women face in starting all over again in pursuit of a new career? One solution is for employers to provide new opportunities and special encouragement for women, such as career planning workshops, flexible work schedules to accommodate further education, job sharing, on-site day care, and awareness training for males. However, employers cannot be expected to solve this problem by themselves. More far-reaching changes are needed.

We need innovative approaches at the societal level. These might include government-sponsored financing of career development activities for both women and men, sponsorship by educational institutions of work-study plans and career-oriented part-time and evening programs, and community-sponsored family counseling services to assist in developing solutions to women's home-career conflicts.

Still more basic is the need for more flexible attitudes toward roles in marriage and the family. Men must develop new attitudes toward themselves as well as toward women, so that husbands and wives might have truly equal opportunity for self-realization both at home and at work.

Changes along these lines could help to eliminate the problem of career abortion, hasten the scrapping of our sexist model, and enable both sexes to enjoy continually growing commitment to self-actualizing career development. We are excited about the prospects for change in the years ahead.

Reference Note

1. Rosen, B. and Jerdee, T. H. Perceived sex differences in managerially relevant characteristics and attitudes toward the employment of women. Manuscript submitted for publication, 1976.

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Table 1

Perceived Attractions of Higher-Level Careers

	Percent Mentioning
Achievement and self-realization	92
Money	59
Altruistic motives	20
General satisfaction expected	15
Affiliative opportunities	12
Greater autonomy	10
Greater job security	5

Note: Each respondent could list up to three attractions. There were 93 respondents.

Table 2

Perceived Obstacles to Higher-Level Careers

	Percent Mentioning
Family and Life-Style Considerations	
Finances	45
Time and energy demands	27
Husband's career	22
Children	19
Relocation	3
Training and Experience Needs	
Training requirements of career	32
Experience requirements of career	3
Health requirements of career	1
Discrimination or Lack of Opportunity	
Lack of job opportunities in career	27
Sex discrimination in career field	10
Age (too old to start new career)	9

Note: Each respondent could list up to three obstacles. There were 93 respondents.

Figure 1

Two Models of Career Development Process for Women

Idealized Model

I	II	III	IV
Growth Stage	Exploration Stage	Integration Stage	Establishment Stage
Development of interests and capacities	Focusing of interests into general career orientation; development of career-related abilities	Choosing a specific career and integrating it with family interests	Developing career competence and dual commitment to career and family

Sexist Model

I	II	III	IV
Growth Stage	Exploration Stage	Career Abortion Stage	Establishment Stage
Socialization toward "female" careers	Tension between career interests and marital interests	Sacrifice of long-range career development, for the sake of marriage, husband's career, and children; "temporary" job-holding	Settling into compromise job with low commitment, or starting a new career, with financial and life-style stresses on family